The Benchmarking Of Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

While benchmarking is a recognised practice in industry and commerce, both in Australia and overseas, it has yet to find an equivalent place in the field of education. Recently, some Australian interest has been shown in educational benchmarking, but primarily from an economic, efficiency and effectiveness perspective, rather than for explicit and ongoing improvements in teaching and learning outcomes. This paper supports educational benchmarking as a means of developing best practice in pre-service teacher education. The theoretical background of educational benchmarking is discussed within the context of a market driven economy in Australia and where teachers are increasingly employed in a self managing school environment. A description is provided of one attempt at introducing the concept of benchmarking into a pre-service teacher education program which has as its major features, the establishment of collaborative partnership arrangements between local schools and the university and the incorporation of case writing by beginning teachers as a significant means of reflecting on personal practice. The research has demonstrated the authenticity of case writing as a data gathering technique and has illuminated the successful adoption of case writing across the year levels of a Bachelor of Education course. Three areas of professional discourse amongst final year Bachelor of Education beginning teachers have been identified and characterised. Work in progress between two tertiary institutions in regard to benchmarking the quality of courses across similar programs, is also reported.

Educational benchmarking as a means of best practice

Since 1994, staff in the undergraduate program in Education at Victoria University of Technology have investigated the relevance of benchmarking to teacher education. The application of benchmarking, reported initially by Cherednichenko, Hooley, Kruger and Mulraney (1996), was undertaken within the framework provided by the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (Australian Teaching Council, 1996) (see Appendix A) and resulted in the preparation of a statement of the characteristics of what was termed the 'benchmark discourse characteristics' for graduating teachers (see Appendix B).

Shirley Grundy (1995:79) in her response to the Australian College of Education Benchmarking in School Education forum has cautioned against 'taken for granted meanings in the language of benchmarking.' She
argued that educational researchers should contest the imposition of 'hegemonic interpretations.' It would seem however, that mainstream educational thought has accepted a view of benchmarking which reduces the transitive qualities of the participle to the reified prescription of 'benchmarks,' as agreed and measurable standards of educational achievement.

It is the kind of shift in the meaning of 'benchmarking' which Bates (1995:4) would describe as a sign of a rhetoric 'overwhelmingly concerned with economies, markets and money and with the efficiency and competitiveness of the engines of economic growth.' The work undertaken in benchmarking in teacher education at Victoria University of Technology seeks to recover the meaning of the term as an active process of evaluating the practices of teaching and learning. Evans' (1994:7) definition of benchmarking has been the starting point. Benchmarking is a process of deciding what is important; understanding how you now do it and how well you do it; learning from others how they do it; and applying what you have learnt in a way that leads to you doing it better than before. Then you do it all again.

What is striking about successful benchmarking in industry is the extent to which it involves the working practitioners (Robson, 1995) and not senior management; a marked contrast to proposals for benchmarking in education.

The attempt to introduce benchmarks into education is driven largely by a concern to demonstrate the results of educational policy, system management and funding. McGaw has argued that has meant the primary goal of benchmarking is the measurement of publicly accepted outcomes because in his opinion, fields such as education do not possess 'ready outcome measures to use as indicators of good performance' (McGaw 1995:8). The assumption is that 'best practice' cannot be described without the evidence of the outcomes of 'best practice'. That may be correct, but the striking feature of McGaw's argument and similar discussions (Masters and Forster, 1996) of benchmarks is how completely the debate has become concerned with measurable and standardised outcomes. 'Practice,' the practice of both teaching and learning, has been rendered invisible and thus devalued. That is not to assert that policy makers should be denied access to politically powerful proofs of the effectiveness of their programs, but it is to recognise that what policy makers find informative is not in a form which is useful to teachers who are more concerned with trustworthy information with which to improve practice (Somekh, 1994).

What is missing in the proposals for the establishment of educational
benchmarks is any way of directly connecting the benchmarks with what teachers and students do. McGaw (1995) argues because education does not have measurable outcomes that therefore benchmarking should be concerned with identifying levels of performance and not with improving practice. The assertion is a failure to conceptualise practice as anything other than a low-grade and uncomplicated activity, the performance of which is meaningless without some standard by which to judge its effectiveness. Plausible possibly; but in fact, the relation is in the opposite direction. 'Standard benchmarks' are without significance unless they are tied to an understanding of the nature and complexity of practice. Benchmarking makes sense only if the teacher can become aware of the way in which the practices of the classroom lead to students showing particular learning outcomes. Any separation of outcome from practice disables teachers' understanding and constructs policy as nothing more than blatant social control.

Practice however, is highly complex and as both Connell (1995) and Giddens (1984) have noted, is the result of human agents interacting knowledgeably with the structures which comprise social life. Those who advocate standardised educational evaluation take the easy and arguably self-serving way out in letting practice slip from the benchmarking agenda by focusing only on definitions of outcomes which are conveniently measured. They miss the potential for understanding that will flow from a comprehensive study of practice in education and in particular, the way in which teachers recognise their students' learning, how learning is related to teaching practice and how both teaching and learning might be improved.

Teacher education is a good example of the need to read learning outcomes in the context of the practices from which the learning is generated. Schools vary greatly and so do classes in schools and yet mentor teachers have no difficulty in making a general judgement that graduating teachers are ready to teach. The notion of competence is implicated in practical experience, both of the mentor and the graduating teacher. The understanding of the nature of competence and how it comes to be valued require an attempt to describe and interpret practice. Any attempt to impose benchmark standards will provide illusory security. As the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching shows, any statement of competent practice requires the interpretation of examples derived from practice.

Three questions have guided the work at Victoria University of Technology in relation to the development of competent practice for beginning teachers:

Can a discursive representation of personal teaching practice, such as
Case Writing within agreed interpretive structures, enhance the generation of professional readiness and ongoing development?

Does a collection of such Case Writing and other evidence of practice, provide an insight into the nature and quality of the curriculum, organisation and practices of a teacher education program?

Can that collection of the discursive representations of teaching practice enable a comparison of the learning outcomes of different teacher education programs and consequently serve as a basis for benchmarking between programs?

The study in progress at Victoria University of Technology has reached the stage where the undergraduate courses enable student and graduating teachers to produce complex representations of practice. Staff who teach in the Bachelor of Education courses are not yet in a position to answer these questions. The next step will be to establish a relationship between mentor teachers, student teachers and teacher educators which validates the representation of practice in the student teachers' case writing.

In the context of the questions which are guiding this study, 'competence' takes on a constructive meaning, quite different from the pejorative interpretations with which

the concept is commonly associated, for example that offered by Barnett (1994). Competence in teaching is the 'becoming' kind of state for the teaching practitioner which Barnett describes as 'beyond competence,' a reflective and reflexive engagement of the practitioner with practice and theory. The acknowledgment that a graduating teacher receives the approval of a supervising teacher that she is 'ready to teach' is not a statement of the attainment of some absolute standard. It is a formal step in becoming a competent teacher, but one which is carried out through an intimate and extended interpretation of practice and dialogue.

Frameworks for interpretation are necessary to make understandings and decisions explicit. In an interpretive environment however, or in what Giddens (1991) has termed 'reflexive modernity', it is not only people

who are evaluated in institutions. The institutions themselves are open to scrutiny. Thus, an interpretive schema such as the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching becomes the object of inquiry as much as the teachers, teacher educators and student teachers who work within its scope. One outcome of the benchmarking of teacher education may be an improved framework for describing, interpreting and judging teaching.
Benchmarking within a teacher education program

Case Writing in the Bachelor of Education, 1996

Students in all four years of the Bachelor of Education write about their practice in schools as cases. The introduction of case writing has occurred slowly over the past three years. Fourth year graduating teachers first used cases to represent their practice and to respond to the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching. Years 1-3 have since been encouraged to write cases and to reflect on their practice in the context of these competencies. No uniform structure has been given, rather students have been introduced to case writing and the competencies with the goal to provide the opportunity to use the cases as the stimulus for a reflective professional conversation with their mentor teacher and university colleagues.

Students' case writing was collected from each of the year levels. Initially lecturers read and responded to students' writing as a description and a discussion of practice. A selection of these cases which reflect appropriate responses to the task, were then analysed in greater detail. A content analysis was applied to all selected cases, with the content of the cases being investigated for evidence of the National Teaching Competencies, that is, an analysis using the framework which students were given to guide their writing. The content was then analysed to identify evidence of the nine benchmark characteristics previously constructed from an investigation of the case writing of fourth year graduating teachers. This analysis provided a framework for interpreting the practice of student teachers and their connections of practice to theory, one of the fundamental principles of the Bachelor of Education program.

These two consistent frameworks for interpreting and comparing the representations of practice at all year levels of the course were applied. The data analysis provided a method for identifying benchmark or best practice cases, for investigating the differences between the understanding of practice and theory in each year level and with other teacher education programs.

First Year, Bachelor of Education

In Education Practice A, Year 1 students were asked to write five cases during their fifteen day school placement, preferably one case in each area of competence of the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (1996), for the explicit purposes of:
1. Reading and increasing their knowledge and understanding of the five areas of competence described in the first Australian National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching;

2. Encouraging observation of and participation in practice, writing about practice, reflecting about practice, facilitating professional conversations about practice with their classroom teacher, their peers and their University colleague; and

3. Compiling a longitudinal collection of written cases for the inclusion in and development of individual portfolios (Year 1-Year 4).

As this was one component of Education Practice A students were asked 'to craft' only one of their cases.

Forty two sets of cases were collected. For the purpose of this research, all crafted cases were selected (n=14) and the 'best' case from each of the remaining sets of cases (n=28) were examined to learn more about the students' Education Practice A experience and links to the Bachelor of Education course; and to investigate how student teachers describe, interpret and theorise about practice in primary schools in relation to the five areas of beginning teaching competence.

The crafted and sample of selected cases comprised the following areas of competence:

- Competence 1: Using and developing professional knowledge and values n=14
- Competence 2: Communicating, interacting and working with students and others n=16
- Competence 3: Planning and managing the teaching and learning process n=6
- Competence 4: Monitoring and assessing student progress and learning outcomes n=4
- Competence 5: Reflecting, evaluating and planning for continuous improvement n=1

Of the forty two case writers, one writer had analysed his case as comprising more than one competence as illustrated in the Case Studies illustrating
National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (1996). The analysis indicated that students wrote about their practice \((n=24)\), their classroom teacher's practice \((n=13)\), their professional relationship with their classroom teacher \((n=3)\); and their questioning of teachers' and/or the schools' professional practice \((n=2)\).

Investigation of the three broad categories comprising nine characteristics of benchmark discourse (See Appendix B) developed by Cherednichenko, Hooley, Kruger and Mulraney (1996), indicated that Year 1 student teachers' cases comprised Practice Described \((n=9)\), Practice Described and Practice Interpreted \((n=21)\); and Practice Described, Practice Interpreted and Practice Theorised \((n=12)\). Although twelve cases comprised Practice Described, Practice Interpreted and Practice Theorised, only four of these would be considered to be benchmark cases. Three cases were descriptions of questionable but professionally acceptable practice. The writers' discourse present and interpret rich descriptions of practice, an understanding of practice; and an awareness that they and/or teachers can initiate changes in practice to implement better practice:

I found that teaching can be very complex as you need to know your students inside and out. You then have to help them not only to learn but to feel good about themselves in order to learn. You need to cater for their needs even if this means setting a completely different lesson for some or giving individual attention. (See Appendix C:1.)

Two cases encapsulated the writers' 'practice-reflection-practice' cycle, demonstrating reflection on practice and search to improve student learning outcomes. For example, a student teacher comments on how frustrating it was that her prep children were not understanding the order of numbers, no matter how many times it was explained. She discovers how difficult it can be to make a concept easier and more interesting for children:

Then I had an idea. The next day I asked if I could do the lesson again. This time I prepared my lesson with songs and games. First I went through it with the children on the board. Then I taught them two songs about the numbers and counting backwards from ten to one. I also played a game with the children. This game focused on the children singing while counting backwards. Just adding in things these children enjoyed. I taught them mathematics without the hassles from the day before.

Second Year, Bachelor of Education

A selection of 10 cases written by second year student teachers were analysed for indicators of the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (1996). From the writing about classroom practices
the following indicators of teaching competence were identified. The cases tend to describe two major areas of competence which are Area of Competence 2, communicating and interacting with students and

Area of Competence 3, the teaching and learning process. By contrast, there are relatively few illustrations of the remaining Areas of Competence: 1, using professional knowledge; 4, assessing student progress and 5, evaluating programs.

In Area of Competence 2, communicating, interacting and working with students, four indicators which refer specifically to students are found in the majority of cases. These include descriptions of effective communication, developing positive relationships with students and encouraging positive student behaviour. The following excerpt describes the process of responding to individual differences as:

I believed I could make a difference with James once I got to know him...... Mrs D relocated James to the adjoining portable and left him to myself. I decided that this would be the perfect opportunity to attempt to build a rapport with James. We sat and talked for over an hour about things that interested James I found out that he liked motor bikes, football and basketball.

The other major area of Area of Competence 3, planning and managing the teaching and learning process is described in many cases. A case showing evidence of purposeful planning and matching content and teaching approaches to student learning is found in Appendix C:2. Additionally, the process of planning is illuminated by the following extract:

Mr E hands me a few photocopied school documents based on mathematics and language. The things which were highlighted were, "famous people", "five minute speech," "time" and "analogue and digital". "There you go, that is all you need to plan your lesson," he says. I note down some ideas based on language and speech, but they are BORING. I need a motivating and challenging lesson which should be creative. I've got it, a creative language based activity on a famous person. Each child will receive a letter addressed to a famous person. Their task will be to write an acceptance speech as the famous person and take on their role.

In this episode, the classroom teacher defines the lesson's content while the student teacher selects the teaching and learning approaches to motivate and engage students in learning. One reason for adopting teaching approaches that engage students actively in developing knowledge is portrayed as follows:
The amount of interest in reading each other's stories and the discussion that arose from this demonstrated to me that the students were actively engaged in developing their own knowledge and I had to be flexible and responsive to their interest in developing their own knowledge rather than dampen the enthusiasm and insist on them finishing the set task.

These anecdotes indicate that a focus of second year writing is trialing new teaching approaches in attempting to put theory into practice. However, the student teachers seem to rely on classroom teachers for advice, guidance and support in developing their competence to plan and manage the teaching and learning process.

Finally, in Area of Competence 5, reflecting and evaluating, some cases include an indicator of critical reflection to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Reflection on individual differences is illustrated as follows:

I have thought about my conversation with Mrs D and empathise with her position. Why should James take up most of her teaching time? Is it worth trying to redeem one lost soul when that means all of the other class members suffer academically, or is it her duty as a teacher?

In the questions, the dilemma is viewed from the differing perspectives of the teacher and students. This appears an indicator that critical reflection is beginning to emerge in second year case writing.

Two benchmark cases were identified from those analysed. They clearly demonstrated the student teachers’ ability to richly describe a teaching and learning situation and to explore learners as knowledgeable agents in constructing their own learning. The ability to interpret a case using a particular top-down conceptual framework, such as the National Teaching Competencies was evident in cases where the framework was prescribed in the task. In the benchmark cases the student teacher not only reflects critically on practice, but is able to draw conclusions and develop principles for improving teaching and learning from the experience described in the case.

The case writing of Year 2 student teachers demonstrates awareness of the competencies and their interpretation. It does not typically include connections to academic theory but it does demonstrate the student teacher is able to construct general understandings of practice and identify the transferability of this knowledge to other educational settings and environments. It does not always describe or reflect understandings of what constitutes best practice, but it is able to draw conclusions about inappropriate practices and recommend or
investigate alternative ones. The role of the mentor teacher and the developing awareness of the teacher's responsibility for learning is evident in the type of cases written and the student teacher's reported discussion with mentor teachers.

Second year student teachers' cases were very often about one particular student, their learning style and the challenge of working with this student as the teacher. It is suggested that this strong interest in individual students reflects the strong focus on learning styles and approaches to learning in the second year of the Bachelor of Education and the limited experience these student teachers have of schools. Possibly these choices indicate a growing awareness of the personal responsibility student teachers begin to experience as they make the transition from student to teacher.

Third Year, Bachelor of Education

Case Writing in Year 3 was introduced to the student teachers as a means of their documenting examples of the practice which they regarded as closest to representing competence. They examined examples of cases written by both experienced and graduating teachers. In three sessions prior to formal school experience, the student teachers analysed the cases with the purpose of identifying the features of good cases and how they might undertake their own Case Writing.

During their teaching rounds, the student teachers were asked to maintain the normal records required of student teachers, in particular a journal in which they noted aspects of their teaching which might form the basis of a case. During their teaching, the student teachers were asked to draft five brief (50 - 100 words) cases, one of which they were to expand into a full (500 word) case which illustrated one of the elements of the National Competency Framework. The completion of the Case Writing and reflection on its meaning, was formal content in classes in the three weeks following teaching practice.

All Cases written by Year 3 student teachers (40 approximately) were read and evaluated within both the National Competency Framework and the Victoria University of Technology Benchmark Characteristics. Each of the four cases identified as 'benchmark Year 3 cases' contained elements of the competency area assigned to the case by the Year 3 student teacher. In that regard most of the Year 3 cases were little different from Year 4 cases. For example in the 'benchmark case' reproduced in Appendix C:3, the student teacher writes within Area of Competence 1, 'using and developing professional knowledge and values': 
Having studied Australian Labour history I remembered the use of primary sources as an effective tool ....... Through my reading of these specific moments in history, and with the prior knowledge of other struggles for independence of country and human spirit, I had gained an understanding of the relationship between these historical events and the age of enlightenment ....... I explained to my supervising teacher that I felt quite overwhelmed by about how I was going to present this material and how understandings of the concepts would be made by the students ....... We examined the material as a whole class ....... I felt my questioning techniques were tentative as I was not sure how closely I needed to adhere to the actual time, place, date aspect of the lesson as opposed to discussion of more general concepts ........ The students did appear to be interested and they showed this by asking questions and my making links with concepts such as oppression and revolution ....... The students were quite fascinated by Locke's philosophies ....... An area which I would like to become an expert in is area of effective questioning or inquiry.

The extracts from the Case indicate that the student teacher is showing an explicit engagement with three of the elements of Area of Competence 1, in particular, that the student teacher 'knows content and its relationship to educational goals', 'understands the relationship between processes of inquiry and content knowledge' and is 'active in developing and applying professional knowledge.' Elements from the other Areas of Competence can be read in the Case, which in itself is a convincing demonstration that the student teacher has sophisticated skills in Area of Competence 5 'Reflecting, evaluating and planning for continuous improvement.'

What distinguished the benchmark cases from the majority of the Year 3 cases was that they located specific concerns within a broader teaching and learning context. Many of the other cases described efforts by the student teachers to manage individual students labelled as having learning difficulties or being discipline problems. The students were represented in those latter cases as being isolated from other students. Even when the benchmark cases referred to individual problems, they did so in a way which enabled the reader to recognise the presence of other students and thus present a sense of the complexity of the classroom. Year 3 cases are strongest on description and interpretation and contain less detail of theorising.

The benchmark cases contained rich description which formed the basis of convincing interpretations of practice. In the benchmark cases, the interpretations of practice referred to specific theoretical frameworks which the writers used to present personal understandings, to form
questions for investigation and to make proposals for future action.

Apart from one case which suggested that the writer was writing from the standpoint of a successful graduate teacher, Year 3 cases were distinguishable from Year 4 cases in two clear and related respects:

1. Year 3 benchmark cases present the writer as a student teacher, who must depend in some way on the supervising teacher. The dependence, evidence of an awareness by the student teachers that they are not yet competent, is seen in comments such as, 'Meanwhile a subtle glance was made with my supervising teacher, who mouthed, 'It's okay, leave it alone.' That is the supervising teacher appears to take on a definite support role in which giving approval, advising, encouraging and giving privileged information about students, are important acts of mentoring.

2. The Year 3 benchmark cases show that the student teachers are not yet convinced of their own competence. In a number of cases, that lack of conviction was evident in the strategy of finishing cases with a series of questions to be answered in future practice. In other cases, the student teachers are more assertive and identified specific aspects of teaching practice which they sought to develop. For example, in the case reproduced in Appendix F, the student teacher writes, 'An area which I would like to become expert in is the area of effective questioning or inquiry, to know how to encourage and facilitate understanding and building on the prior knowledge of students.'

The benchmark Year 3 student teacher case presented in Appendix F contains the elements of both the National Competency Framework and the Victoria University of Technology Benchmark Discourse Characteristics which might be expected of a graduating teacher. What is missing is the self-recognition which the graduating teacher has that her practice has been affirmed as professionally competent.

Competence, it seems, is something more than passing some kind of test for entry to

the profession. It is also a matter of the self-perception of the teacher, which is a judgement intertwined with personal, practical experience and not just a matter of meeting externally determined criteria.

Fourth year, Bachelor of Education

Within the fourth year Bachelor of Education program, all students are
required to submit five cases, one in each area of competence as outlined in the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching. All subjects are integrated as much as possible and organised around the procedures of participatory action research.

In addition to the demonstration of competence, the fourth year program is structured around a number of principles regarding the seeking of explanation of classroom and schooling experience, development of an informed and defensible educational viewpoint, engagement with the professional discourse and an ongoing investigation of explicit teaching and learning through the establishment of partnership arrangements with the school and mentor teachers. The fourth year program is therefore conceived as a holistic partnership and professional year, with beginning teachers able to provide evidence of competence, reflection and critical consciousness.

An analysis of seventy five cases from the final year program in 1996, indicated strong evidence of practice described and practice interpreted. Some evidence was present of practice theorised, although to a lesser extent. For example, in describing a particular set of classroom interactions, one beginning teacher wrote:

I personally find that listening to student feedback and ideas is a very important and often positive way of organising and monitoring the class and your own teaching. A lot of time the ideas students come up with can be quite amazing, but it's always best to remember that there is a time for the students to have a say and an equally important time for the teacher to play their part in the learning process.

The cases show a group of committed practitioners at work. They reveal teaching as a process of unfolding understanding, with teachers and students learning together as they both come to grips with social and educational practice. There is a maturing acceptance portrayed of the classroom and of learning itself being sites of uncertainty, demanding flexible and adaptable procedures. The cases are also child-centred, showing a sensitivity to children's needs, particularly when complex situations and difficult children are encountered.

In addition to a typical fourth year case (Appendix C:4), an annotated fourth year benchmark case has been included (Appendix D), which shows evidence of meeting the five competency areas of the national framework, as well as a majority of the nine benchmark case characteristics. The following benchmark commentary, written by a fourth year colleague, exhibits a commensurate capacity to analyse a
case and conduct a professional conversation as advice:

Within a classroom of mixed ability, it is often difficult to give students the extra time and instruction they sometimes need. This teacher was very successful in identifying the problems this student was having and showed her professionalism and teaching knowledge to continue trying different teaching methods. The introduction of concrete materials seems to have been instrumental in this student's learning development, as was the extensive amount of patience this teacher showed. The case highlighted the importance of one-to-one teaching and learning and successfulness of this type of approach.

Competence, reflection, theorising throughout the Bachelor of Education

The above preliminary analysis of case writing throughout the four years of the Bachelor of Education program, indicates that the technique can be utilised to provide evidence of teaching competence and because of that, can be incorporated into a benchmarking process. Further research is required to investigate whether or not case writing alone is a sufficient condition to demonstrate teaching competence, or whether satisfying the competency framework in this manner demonstrates a totality of educational entry-level competence and of being ready for entry to the next phase of preparation, that of readiness to teach, school induction and the first year-out experience. These questions are of particular significance in the graduating of competent teachers who enter teacher education courses from disadvantaged and non-English speaking backgrounds.

The quality of the cases as adequate representations of competent practice, have arisen from partnership arrangements with schools and subsequently, depend on the quality of the schooling experience so gained. This indicates that a more extensive partnership and mentoring program will lead to more intense and reflective writing.

Many of the cases centre on issues of classroom discipline and problem incidents, however, a number are concerned with a more detailed description of teaching and learning. Earlier cases are sometimes concerned with individual children and most are written with an encouraging and exploratory intent. The cases manifest a reflective tone overall, but display to a somewhat lesser extent, an explicit conceptual approach to teaching and learning in the development of personal theorising for teaching and learning improvement.
Case writing in the earlier years of the Bachelor of Education show a willingness of the beginning teachers to integrate theory and practice and to implement new approaches to teaching and, within this process, there is reliance on the classroom mentor teacher. There is a tendency therefore with earlier cases to concentrate on the role of the mentor teacher, with the beginning teacher having observer rather than participant status; such cases might be considered as 'pre-practice.' A strength of the case writing and therefore of the Bachelor of Education program, is its increasing portrayal of teaching as uncertain and problematic, but at the same time, demanding positive and realistic action by teachers in support of children's learning. That is, there is a recognition that the teacher needs to act to improve a learning situation, rather than merely apply predetermined solutions.

On the basis of the above discussion, it is proposed that case writing constitutes an adequate means of internal educational benchmarking across the Bachelor of Education for course improvement purposes. However, further work is required to:

* characterise benchmark cases at each year level
* co-ordinate the manner in which students are introduced to the technique of case writing and how to protect its naturalistic and informal style
* reveal the impact case writing is having on student teachers, mentor teachers and university lecturers.

The cases show sufficient definition of practice described, interpreted and theorised as a progression from first to fourth year, to enable connections to be made with the main features of how the course is conducted at each year level. Of central importance in this progression, is the means by which the teaching program encourages a personal transformation of beginning teachers from practitioner, to reflective practitioner, to theorising practitioner.

Using portfolios to benchmark across institutions

For the first time in 1996, all final year Bachelor of Education students at Victoria University of Technology, were required to compile a teaching portfolio as a means of reflecting on their work throughout the year, both at the university and when on partnership placement in schools. The project was supported by the conclusion of Wade and Yarbrough (1996) that portfolios are potentially useful in those teacher education programs that are constructivist in orientation and which are encouraging of students in 'creating their own meaning and developing both expertise
in and commitment to the process of reflection.'

Portfolio construction was included as one of a number of requirements associated with each student's work in schools. The only guideline provided by the university was that a range of appropriate items should be included as evidence of competence in the five competency areas as described by the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching. All final year beginning teachers at Victoria University of Technology are required to submit systematic evidence of competence so described, through their final school report, written work and overall participation in the program.

Accordingly, the portfolios as developed, contained an extensive variety of materials including research reports; literature reviews; curriculum units; lesson plans; case writing of classroom incidents; video and audio tapes; photographs; newspaper clippings; awards, certificates and notification of activities such as first aid, youth work; tutoring; personal and academic references and transcripts of results. This approach fits broadly with recommendations made to schools and universities by the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession (Victoria, 1996).

A number of roundtable discussions were organised, where small groups engaged in commenting on prepared questions, typical of an employment interview situation and which required each roundtable member to refer to items in their portfolio. Outside observers where also invited to participate in the roundtables and to make appropriate comment to the course co-ordinator.

The roundtable dialogues not only enabled each member of the group to utilise evidence in discussion of their partnership experience, but provided avenues into reflective and theoretical thinking from descriptions and analysis of practice. Although Wolf (1994) has commented that 'Articulating an educational philosophy and teaching goals are critical first steps in preparing a portfolio,' the process described here was based on the notion of more philosophical issues being generated by the portfolio process itself, theory emerging from practice, rather than being present at the beginning.

Each roundtable member was given the opportunity to defend personal viewpoints through the exhibition of evidence from their portfolio and by so
doing, engage the professional discourse in a public manner. In most cases, the evidence provided was representative of practice, rather than the practice itself, although some video tape evidence was available. In other instances, the direct experience of lecturers having visited the classrooms of the beginning teachers concerned was also available.

In subsequent interviews, many members of the final year Bachelor of Education group expressed satisfaction with the overall portfolio process and indicated that portfolio construction should occur over as long a period of time as possible, if it is to form part of a structured approach to reflective thinking on practice. Loughran and Corrigan (1996) record a similar outcome arising from their work with Graduate Diploma in Education students where, over time, 'The portfolio encompasses learning about one's own learning and teaching and understanding how that might influence one's own teaching.'

A portfolio process that forms a major aspect of the final year of the Bachelor of Education, including its use to defend viewpoints in public exhibition via a roundtable mechanism, will considerably add to the professionalism of the course and will help shift the locus of assessment from that of authorising to collaborative peer support. The process is envisaged as forming the major component of a five-stage benchmarking procedure for course improvement with another institution (Appendix E).

At some point during the process, each institution will need to make judgements regarding the connections between course outcomes and course structure. It may be claimed by one institution that beginning teacher reflective capability as demonstrated during roundtable discussions, is due to an extensive partnership experience in schools, a feature not present to the same extent at the other institution. The impact of course changes so made, will then need to be subject to ongoing benchmarking over future years.

The understanding of practice is the starting point for the efforts at benchmarking in teacher education at Victoria University of Technology. As reported here, students in all year levels in their practical participation in schools, write cases of the form described by Shulman (1992). Such representations of practice, in themselves, do not constitute a basis for benchmarking teacher education. That latter task requires frameworks within which the
practices of student and graduating teachers can be related to the features and practices of the Bachelor of Education. The adoption of the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching and the generation of a statement of Benchmark Discourse Characteristics, is not the setting of standardised outcomes for teacher education. Both the Competency Framework and the Discourse Characteristics are structures for interpreting practice which staff in the undergraduate program are using to inquire into student teachers' experiences over the four years of the Bachelor of Education.

The close study of practice in teacher education, which is made possible by the interpretation of student teachers' case writing in the context of the two interpretive frameworks, has the result of opening up the way in which graduating teachers' readiness to teach is recognised and evaluated. It is only through such frameworks that different teacher education programs will be able to have the illuminating and evaluative dialogue about the connections between course structure, practice and outcomes which benchmarking will require.

References


Appendix A
National Competency Framework For Beginning Teaching

Area of Competence 1: Using and developing professional knowledge and values

1.1 Knows content and its relationship to educational goals
1.2 Understands the relationship between processes of inquiry and content knowledge
1.3 Understands how students develop and learn
1.4 Active in developing and applying professional knowledge
1.5 Operates from an appropriate ethical position
1.6 Operates within the framework of law and regulation
1.7 Values diversity; all students have right to learn

Area of Competence 2: Communicating, interacting and working with students and others

2.1 Communicates effectively with students
2.2 Develops positive relationships with students
2.3 Recognises and responds to individual differences
2.4 Encourages positive student behaviour
2.5 Responds to role in the team responsible for students' education
2.6 Works effectively with teachers, ancillary staff and others
2.7 Works effectively with parents and others responsible for the care of students
2.8 Communicates with school support staff, the profession and the wider community

Area of Competence 3: Planning and managing the teaching and learning process

3.1 Plans purposeful programs to achieve specific student learning outcomes
3.2 Matches content, teaching approaches and student development and learning in planning
3.3 Designs teaching programs to motivate and engage students
3.4 Structures learning tasks effectively
3.5 Demonstrates flexibility and responsiveness
3.6 Establishes clear, challenging and achievable expectations for students
3.7 Fosters independent and co-operative learning
3.8 Engages the students actively in developing knowledge
Area of Competence 4 Monitoring and assessing student progress and learning outcomes

4.1 Knows the educational basis and role of assessment in teaching
4.2 Uses assessment strategies that take account of relationships between teaching, learning and assessment
4.3 Monitors student progress and provides feedback on progress
4.4 Maintains records of student progress
4.5 Reports on student progress to parents and others responsible for the care of students

Area of Competence 5 Reflecting, evaluating and planning for continuous improvement

5.1 Critically reflects on own practice to improve the quality of teaching and learning
5.2 Evaluates teaching and learning programs
5.3 Plans to meet longer-term personal and school goals
5.4 Develops professional skills and capacity.

Appendix B Benchmark Case Characteristics

A. Practice Described

A1 The teacher in writing the case ensures that it is descriptively rich, enabling the reader to experience the event by attending to the personal characteristics of the teacher and learners, the physical conditions of the learning environment and the patterns of social relations in which teachers and learners are located.

A2 The case describes a situation which the reader will identify as a representation of a competent teacher's practice.

A3 The teacher makes an explicit connection between teaching practices and students' learning, that is, is outcomes focused.

B. Practice Interpreted

B1 The teacher employs an explicit conceptual framework in interpretation, explanation and forming proposals for the future.
B2 The teacher in the case represents teachers and learners as knowledgeable agents who reflectively and reflexively respond to each other in teaching and learning.

B3 The representation of the event in the case indicates that the teacher has asked her/himself questions about the described event opening up the possibility for different interpretations.

C. Practice Theorised

C1 In writing about practice, the teacher conveys a sense of struggle and doubt about expertise.

C2 The case provides an indication of the teacher's personal theorising about educational questions.

C3 In the case, the teacher demonstrates clear commitment to action based on the evidence from and understandings of teaching and learning practices, personal and professional knowledge and moral principles.

Appendix C:1 First Year Case, 1996

After working with the children for a week, I was able to learn about what they could and couldn't do, what they liked and didn't like.

I have worked with one group in particular which are a little slower that the others in their class. Each time I worked with them, I found out a lot more about them, what areas they were good at and what areas
they needed help in. I also found that they lost interest in what they were doing very quickly.

The first time I took the group, I found that they didn't work well individually without being reminded of what they were supposed to be doing. The second time I took the group, I made them work as a group and they didn't lose interest in the task and I found that they were bursting to tell me the answers individually. The third time I took the group, we were working on a flight project and it was matching the meanings of the words. I thought about all of the lessons I had taken them for. I worked with them as a group and individually, so they felt comfortable during the activity and could also prove to themselves that they do the activity individually if they had to.

To start the lesson off, I made them read a meaning each and then as a group, figure out its match. The children didn't really like to read aloud as they kept telling me they couldn't do it, or were not very good at it. I knew they felt this way because of all the other children in the class who could read really well. Getting them to work the answers out together made them feel a lot better about themselves as they didn't worry about getting the answers wrong as they all felt equal and were not threatened by each other.

This group of children are put down a lot by the other children and it has been affecting them. I think they lose interest in the topics because they simply don't want to do them as they are afraid of what the other children will say. They also hide their thoughts because they automatically think they are wrong when a lot of the time they are on the right track. I used the knowledge I had been told about them and found myself developing a teaching strategy to help them learn and become aware of what they could do and not to give in to what they hear, but to believe in themselves.

I found that teaching can be very complex as you need to know your students inside and out. You then have to help them not only to learn but to feel good about themselves in order to learn. You need to cater for their needs, even if this means setting a completely different lesson for some, or giving individual attention.
Appendix C: Second Year Case, 1996

'Today you are lucky to be having Mrs .... to take the English Clinic on adjectives ....;' my supervising teacher kept talking. I became aware of an audible sigh in the background, 'Oooohh adjectives.' I took a deep breath and decided to jump in the deep end and face this challenge, head-on.

'Obviously some of you know all about adjectives, so I'm going to need your help to explain this to the grade 3 students.' A few eager hands shot up, 'Miss, Miss.' I knew no matter how eager, some of these students had no idea. I had asked for help, so I had to acknowledge their enthusiasm. 'A describing word.' 'Like nouns.' 'Describe things.' I took this information and rearranged it for my purpose. 'Yes, an adjective is a describing word that describes nouns which are objects or people.'

Not waiting for any more assistance, I pushed ahead. On the whiteboard, I wrote the words desk and carpet and we brainstormed suitable adjectives. The adjectives suggested mainly gave indication of colour or size, red, brown, big and small. I had not anticipated this. As I handed out the worksheet, I asked the class to think of adjectives that might make the passage more informative, humourous or out of this world. My only criteria was that the adjectives had relevance to the nouns they preceded.

Armed with worksheets and pencil cases, the children went back to their seats. The worksheets had a simple passage about their classroom and below it, the same passage with a gap before the nouns they were to use adjectives for. As they finished, they excitedly brought their worksheet up to me. Their use of adjectives varied. The word classroom was accompanied by a vast array of adjectives such as portable, big, clean and small, all of which were used appropriately. Two students chose the words 'wild' and 'Teddybear' and continued with the theme throughout the passage. I was greatly encouraged by this reaction and continued as I had planned.
'Now that you understand how we use adjectives, I would like you to choose a story you have written and attempt to use adjectives to make it more interesting, more descriptive, or more real to the reader. Use a different coloured pencil or biro and fill in adjectives where you think appropriate. I'm going to allow you about ten minutes. Any questions? Okay, then go to it.' That's exactly what they did, but not quite as I had expected.

The students took longer than I had expected to decide which piece of work they wanted to use. They compared their stories with those of their classmates and the object of the exercise became lost in the excitement of reading each other's work. I took a mental note that next time, I would choose the piece of work. We did not quite finish within the allocated time and many did not finish at all, but all the students did attempt to improve their story writing. The weaker students struggled to find the nouns within their stories to connect the suitable adjectives and when they did, the adjectives were still colour or size related. Many of the more competent writers had already used adjectives appropriately and struggled to find nouns that needed adjectives.

The array of adjectives and their corresponding nouns included cream telephones, fat caterpillars, pointy surfboards, big rocks and silly boys. I felt cheated that I was unable to spend more time on this lesson for the unexpected turn it had taken could be utilised for more language and reading experiences. Overall, adjectives were used by all students to some extent. How accurate their use in future personal writing was yet to be demonstrated to me. At this stage, I was just glad to have excited the class at all, after the initial sighs.

In planning for the lesson, I planned a purposeful activity to achieve a specific learning outcome, although I had not anticipated the extra development of interest that arose. The goals I had set were clear, challenging and achievable, allowing for both independent and co-operative learning. The amount of interest in reading each others stories and the discussion that arose from this, demonstrated to me that the students were actively engaged in developing their own language and I had to be flexible and responsive to their interest, rather than dampen the enthusiasm and insist on them finishing the set task.

This lesson and its activity allowed me to develop a positive relationship with the students and acknowledge their different levels of learning as all answers could be accepted as correct as long as they were relevant. This allowed for all students to participate in the
brainstorming of ideas. Working together on the whiteboard allowed me to monitor their thoughts and give immediate feedback and direction for their individual worksheet.

During the lesson itself, I was able to note any future changes I could make to lead the lesson along a different path. I wonder though if I'll do this for the unexpected tangent this lesson took allowed for a discussion amongst the students about their own writing, that might otherwise never have occurred.
Appendix C:4 Fourth Year Case, 1996

During my third week of my teaching block, I had decided to introduce the children to a very interesting topic - sharks. The students were very eager to learn about this mysterious and dangerous creature. I had decided to introduce the class to a friend of mine who was a shark attack victim. They enjoyed this thoroughly.

Because I did not know how the students would react to this guest speaker, I prepared a set of behavioural rules for them to concentrate on when the guest speaker arrived. They were expected to write seven questions that they would like to ask about his attack. The room was set up as if a press conference and the children were very excited about this day. They were intrigued about sharks and the speaker was perfect. He knew a lot about sharks and the children learned a great deal from him.

Following the talk, the children were to produce a poster about a shark of their choice and write about what they had learned during his talk. The class set about this topic with heads down. They were very excited, enthused and eager. Ashleigh in particular, worked extremely well. At this stage in my rounds, Ashleigh was still examining the way I taught and was not yet used to my discipline strategies. Therefore, to my surprise, he was excited about producing this poster.

In the final minutes of the lesson, I had walked around to observe the student's work. They were becoming works of art! They had made an attractive heading, drawn excellent pictures of sharks and scattered information about the shark and speaker. I walked over to Ashleigh's table and noticed all of the above - except for the information. There was no writing on his work at all. I carefully asked him if he could write something about the shark he drew, or about his questions. He looked at me and simply but abruptly said, 'No!' So I asked him again and this time he ignored me and kept colouring in.

At this stage I had to sit back and think. Should I simply let him go and treat him differently from other children, or should I be as abrupt as he was and demand that he do some writing? I came to a conclusion. I let him go. Getting to know Ashleigh in these three weeks, I have learned not to fight with him, or he would rebel even more against me.
I knew I was being unfair to the other children in a sense, but they seemed to enjoy writing information and for some reason, Ashleigh did not. At least, not today.

Some students had completed their work and I had praised them for their excellent writing. I made sure to do this in front of Ashleigh so he would know what impressed me as a teacher. That afternoon, I congratulated the class on their excellent behaviour and work and reminded them that they could continue their work the next day.

The following day, I had planned that the students continue with their posters. When I finished telling the students what their task was, Ashleigh secretly came to me and without a word, handed me a booklet he had prepared the night before, with information about various sharks. It was five pages long. I was shocked, surprised and very proud of him. He told me that he was thinking about this poster and that he would like to add more to it. I then took the poster and the booklet to the Principal, who I think was just as proud as I was.

Ashleigh has opened himself up to me and when we do work as a class, he now concentrates and produces excellent work. I am still questioning if it is because of me, or simply because deep inside he is a child with a lot of enthusiasm and talent.

Appendix D        Fourth Year Benchmark Case, 1995

Having never experienced working in the area of incorporating Asian perspectives into the curriculum, I was unsure of how students would respond to 'The Tale of Two Cities' unit and whether it would be effective in achieving its aims. I understood the benefits of such a unit, but had not as yet seen how it could assist students experiencing real difficulties.

I had been working for several weeks with a group of students on the introductory sessions of the unit and was immensely enjoying my time working with them. There was, however, one student in my class who constantly experienced difficulty regardless of the activity. He was a new arrival to Australia and understandably experienced problems with the English language. He would rarely contribute to the class, although often encouraged to do so by the class teacher. Each session was a totally new challenge, but he persistently struggled through, none the less, frequently requesting assistance.
I had observed that he would often ask the students at his table for assistance and that there was one particular student who took it upon himself to help him. He would continue to ask questions until he understood the task and would persist in trying to overcome each difficulty he faced. It was inspiring to watch a student who experienced such difficulty, yet faced it with such perseverance.

In my work with this class, I had not yet witnessed a lesson when the task was not a challenge for him, whereas other students had strengths in at least a few areas. This was until the introduction of the 'The tale of Two Cities' section on Hanoi in Vietnam. In this particular task students were given a photograph from which they had to write a descriptive passage, attempting to recognise the location, building styles, people, forms of transport, sport/leisure and shopping activities present in the photograph. As I handed round the photographs I found that in this case many of the other students experienced difficulties with the task, while the student mentioned earlier knew the location of the photograph and had a wealth of information he could share with the class.

For the first time he had experienced success, was an 'expert' at something and could assist his classmates with a task. His response was extremely positive and I gave him the opportunity to share his knowledge with the group. It was a fantastic opportunity to let him know that he had something very worthwhile to contribute to the class.

Upon reflection I have found that the unit is one with great potential and can achieve so much for our many new students experiencing difficulties. The unit also provides a wonderful opportunity for the class to recognise that each member has something very valuable to offer to the whole of the class. Each student has a vast amount of knowledge based on their own background which can be utilised for effective teaching and learning experiences in the classroom.
Appendix EExternal Benchmarking Process (Draft)

Stage 1Portfolio discussion and development at each university
Exchange of summary progress reports

Stage 2Ongoing portfolio discussion and development at each university
Seminar preparation

Stage 3Each university to consider course outcomes at completion of final year

Stage 4Portfolio Seminar (1: full-day)
Participants: To include staff from each university, members of Bachelor of Education, Diploma of Education groups and mentor teachers
Purpose: To enable each university to present portfolio evidence regarding strengths and weaknesses of course outcomes

Stage 5Portfolio Seminar (2: half-day)
Participants: To include staff from each university, teacher organisations, principals, employers, Standards Council, Dean
Purpose: To enable the outcomes of the portfolio process to be discussed with representatives of the profession as a means of making the outcomes of programs extensively known and of obtaining feedback.